Invisible Homelessness: Anonymity, Exposure, and the Right to the City

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Abstract

This essay orbits a central paradox. Perceptions frame the conditions of contact, yet contact frames the conditions of perceptions. Reporting ethnographic fieldwork and archival research in Denver, a city that recently outlawed camping in all open space, this essay builds theoretical bridges between public space, exposure to others, and notions of social justice tethered to right to the city discourse. Building a categorical model of the public space—prime, everyday, and marginal space—we argue that this ban makes it exceedingly difficult for people who are homeless to manage their exposure to those who are housed. Denver's camping ban is part of a broad effort to accelerate the profit potential of prime urban land through both real estate speculation and commerce. Commonplace social justice roots in contact and interaction between social differences in everyday space. The camping ban dislocated homeless people from marginal spaces and hinders contact in everyday spaces. We foreground the voices of Denver's homeless people, those most impacted by the recent ban and we argue this singular code—aside from eliminating hard-fought places of safety and security—disrupts hygiene, mobility, and sociability routines, thereby throwing already precarious lives into further disarray by rendering housing status visible. Contact with others in on equal terms has is theorized to reduce social prejudice. Evicting them from marginal spaces and rendering them visibly homeless in everyday and prime spaces the ban deprives them of a fundamental right to the city, anonymity.

See, I usually have a camp. You guys would be sitting in my tent and I'd be making you coffee!
- Roxanne during our first interview

Homelessness is widely perceived as a rupture of order in the neoliberal city; consequently homeless people’s claims to urban citizenship are routinely contested. The stigmas of visible homelessness, dirty bodies and clothing, ungroomed appearances, a shopping cart full of belongings, even small items like a backpack and bedroll mark them as social pariahs. Visible homelessness renders constructive dialogue between Others difficult at best impossible at worst. Growing from ongoing ethnographic fieldwork and archival research in Denver Colorado, a city that recently outlawed camping in any private or public space, this essay builds theoretical bridges between public space, exposure to Others, and notions of social justice tethered to right to the city.
discourses. We contrast the intent of the ban, essentially an attempt to purify prime public space in Denver the with the consequences borne by people living in the city’s marginal and everyday public spaces. The ban—aside from eliminating hard-fought places of safety and security—disrupts hygiene, mobility, and sociability routines, thereby throwing already precarious lives into further disarray by rendering homeless status more visible. Visible homelessness not only works to culturally reproduce the negative stigma of poverty it renders impossible the enjoyment of a right to the city (Lefebvre, 1996) the domiciled more easily possess, namely the right to anonymity in public (Simmel, 2006). Our extension of right to the city discourse lies along trajectories sketched by Michael Walzer (1983), Bernard Williams (1985), and Iris Young (1990) who variously claim that social justice must root in social interaction. We focus on the possibility for unscripted interaction between two specific groups—people who are homeless and those who are not.

While the tenets of the camping ban obviously violate a fundamental right to the city, namely the right to rest, our work reveals another injustice. By eliminating homeless camps and consequently disrupting personal hygiene and exposure management routines, the ban counteracts the leveling forces inherent in public space. Unable to maintain anonymous public identities, Denver’s unhoused residents are more often compelled to engage with others in public space as obviously homeless people. In this way, the ban steepens the climb to invisible homelessness. Put another way, the ban deprives people without homes of anonymous membership in the urban community as it gathers, ebbs, and flows in public space. We bracket our inquiry within a typology of spaces—including prime, everyday, and marginal—and theories of contact (Allport, 1979) and exposure (Lee, Link, & Farrell, 2004; Wessel, 2009). Doing so, we point toward a more nuanced understanding of the impacts of quality of life policing on the poor people’s lives. After a description of our methods and a discussion of the genesis of the ban, we flesh out our
conceptual framework, then show how the camping ban, while written to protect prime spaces from the threat of visible homelessness, directly impacted marginal spaces, spaces where the unhoused often find shelter. Then we argue that the indirect impacts of the ban, in essence the difficulties that people without homes in Denver now face navigating everyday spaces as anonymous individuals may exacerbate the visible homeless problem the ban was crafted to solve, namely visible homelessness.

Rooting our assertions in urban scholarship, we use the observation of public space compounded with the voices of people surviving on Denver’s mean streets propel this essay’s logical development. As the ban was being debated in city council at the end of 2011 we began our research by analyzing news media reportage, legal archives, and blogs. As the ban took effect, we then interviewed city officials including city council people, police officers, and employees in the departments of parks and recreation, transportation, public works and code enforcement. The perspective we privileged however is from the street—the voices of homeless residents marginalized by the city’s economic restructuring. During the summer of 2013 and for one month in early 2014, we conducted fieldwork and open-ended interviews with 20 of the city’s homeless residents, several of whom we interviewed multiple times. Most interviews were conducted together—an approach that enabled us to integrate the complementary but disciplinary-specific perspectives of geography and anthropology. Unobtrusive observation included attending city council meetings and land use committee meetings as well as hanging out in public space, particularly Civic Center Park and along 16th Street. Participant observation included walking tours led by homeless informants detailing the micro-geographies of their diurnal movement patterns and visits to extant and evicted homeless camps. This is not a stand alone study; instead, it nests within the authors’ work connecting public space and neighborhood change Denver and decades of research among the city’s marginalized populations. Not only is it not an independent study, it is
ongoing. We continue to have many informal conversations with homeless injection drug users at the Denver Harm Reduction Action Center, a community based organization that offers services to the city’s drug using population.

Conceptual Framework and Research Context

Similar to other US cities, homelessness in Denver has economic causes and is combated by myriad mostly misguided regulatory solutions (Hopper, 2003; Kusmer, 2002; Wasserman & Clair, 2009; Wolch & Dear, 1993). Denver’s homeless problem has deep roots in a hyperactive real estate market compounded by a patent lack of rent controls and zoning ordinances mandating the construction of affordable housing (Robinson, 2013). Combating the visible effect of this extraordinary high cost of living, the city has a raft of municipal codes police can use to remove visible homelessness from prime space, such as loitering and disorderly conduct ordinances, a sit & lie ordinance enforced along the 16th street mall, and city-wide park curfews forbidding entry into or presence within all city parks between 11:00 PM and 5:00 AM. Prior to the ban there were still ample places to rest; it was not a crime to unroll a sleeping bag in an alley or along 16th street mall for the night, to set up a tent under a freeway interchange, or to camp along a waterway or in a vacant lot. After the ban, except shelters, motels, or private residences, there is no place a homeless person can legally sleep in Denver.

Since the early 1990s, various urban scholars, such as Mike Davis, Don Mitchell, Jamie Peck, Ed Soja, Neil Smith and Loic Wacquant, have pointed towards the emergence the punitive city conterminous with the rise of entrepreneurial, post-industrial and creative city. Wolch and Deverteuil (2001) outline an alternative framework they call poverty management, which is they see as a complex system designed to ensure the social order, by regulating the urban poor. According to this view, governmental and non-governmental actors deploy various interlocking poverty management strategies, including supportive measures (welfare and shelters) and punitive ones (citation and
incarceration). We align this essay along the conceptual trajectories of poverty management, agreeing that the geographies of service provision significantly shape the geographies of homelessness in the city (Takahashi, 1998). After all, we contacted all and interviewed most of our informants at a harm reduction center. Harm reduction is configuration of care and control aimed at removing not exacerbating stigma (Evans, 2012). Cities are complex social processes; blatant injustice co-exists with supportive currents (DeVerteuil, 2012). While the camping ban can certainly be read as a singular and overtly punitive act, a long standing ‘urge to care’ (Cloke, Johnsen, & May, 2005) in Denver has resulted in many facilities and efforts aimed directly at improving the lives of people living on the street. The multiple interacting contexts (Marr, 2012) of shelters, day centers, harm reduction facilities, proven fundamental to sustaining life and preventing survivalist crime in other contexts (Johnsen, Cloke, & May, 2005), are vital to the everyday and extraordinary experiences of Denver’s homeless population.

The geographical frame we extend to guide our inquiry is Snow and Mulcahy’s (2001) tripartite notion of prime, marginal, and transitional space. Snow and Mulcahy extend Harvey and Moloch’s (Logan & Molotch, 2007) binary modeling of use and exchange value by adding a political element. In so doing, they foreground economic potential of privately owned property. We modify their spatial schematic of prime, marginal and transitional space, using publicness instead of political and economic valuation as conceptual scaffolding. We focus on the spaces in between parcels of private property, on the web of public space constituting the public right of way and public parks. Further, we define publicness in terms of placed diversity, specific places where differences know one another (Lefebvre, 2003), places of eroticism, encounter, and (dis)enchantment (Watson, 2006), of people watching and playfulness (Lofland, 1998), places marked by an anarchic public safety enabled not by police presence but by myriad informal eyes on the street (Jacobs, 1993), and places that lack overt and obvious spatial
control and policing (Nemeth & Hollander, 2010). Importantly the spaces through which our informants move are all public property. That is, the sidewalks, alleyways, parks, slivers of land underneath freeways and flyover ramps, and riparian areas along Denver’s creeks and rivers lived on by people without homes are all owned and controlled by the city of Denver or the State of Colorado.

Though we modify Snow and Mulcahy’s definitions, we keep two of their terms: prime and marginal. Like Snow and Mulcahy, we recognize that economic development drives the neoliberal city. Therefore, we define prime space as showcase public spaces used by entrepreneurs and politicians for commercial and symbolic purposes. Important to consider, not all urban commerce is a vehicle for the creative city. Warehouses, public utilities, and distribution centers however are interspersed with networks and pockets of publicly accessible space. These marginal, in between, spaces have little value to business groups or politicians; however people without homes use them to meet their daily needs of shelter and sociability. Snow and Mulcahy underdeveloped their middle category of transitional space noting that it, propelled by real estate market dynamics, can become either prime or marginal and that it acts as a buffer between the two. Fleshing out this vague middle ground, we substitute everyday space for their transitional space. We understand everyday spaces as making up a majority of the public spaces people move through while navigating urban lives. Everyday spaces are the uncountable sidewalks, side streets, back alleys, neighborhood parks, and plazas of everyday life. They are the spaces of quotidian encounter and eroticism (Watson, 2006) and everyday urbanism (Crawford, 2008) and unremarkable yet vital social tension (Sennett, 1990).

In our scheme both marginal and prime spaces exhibit diminished publicness; while everyday space has the greatest potential for unfettered public discourse. Prime spaces are nexuses of intense economic and symbolic meaning. To all who enter, they demonstrate overt and obvious spatial control. Unconcealed control diminishes
publicness (Nemeth, 2010). Unpopulated and mostly located in or on the periphery of industrial zones, marginal spaces are considered no-go-areas by most urban residents, who avoid vacant lots, abandoned buildings, and the splinters of land surrounding and beneath transportation infrastructure. Marginal places exhibit reduced publicness simply because they lack a diverse and engaged public presence.

Two prime spaces frequented by our informants are the 16th Street mall and Civic Center Park. Concentrating tourists and conventioneers along its heavily commercialized corridor Downtown Denver’s pedestrian 16th Street Mall not only has a geographically specific sit and lie ordinance, prohibiting sitting or lying down on the mall’s sidewalks or alleyways between 7:00 AM and 9:00 PM, it is managed and policed by both the city of Denver and a business improvement district, the Downtown Denver Partnership (DDP). Funded by private commercial property owners, DDP concentrates on economic development, street beautification and cleaning efforts and manages a highly visible security force along 16th Street. Located at a crossroads of government, culture and commerce, Civic Center Park spatially and symbolically links the postmodern architecture of the museum district, the neoclassical county and state government buildings to the modernist skyline formed by Denver’s Central Business District. A 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, the Civic Center Conservancy, advocates for facility improvements, programs park events, raises funds for capital improvements to the park and oversees activities and to revitalize the park. Because private interests heavily impact the design and policing and hence behavior and interaction within both these spaces, they both exhibit a diminished publicness.

Marginal spaces too exhibit a diminished publicness, but for different reasons than for prime spaces. Marginal spaces comprise the public rights of way and slivers of dead zones (Doron, 2008) and cracks in the city (Loukaitou-Sideris, 1996) interspersed within and between functioning as well as abandoned industrial and warehousing structures and
high capacity transportation infrastructure such as railroads and freeways. These areas exhibit a profound and planned temporality: active and noisy during the day and empty during the evening. Cites use industrial zoning to concentrate noxious land uses like recycling centers, power plants, factories, and warehouses away from residential, commercial, and green spaces. Consequently marginal spaces are not only marked by the noise and danger of trains and trucks, by heavy and light rail, and by belching smokestacks but also geographically separate from the rest of the city. Generally depopulated at the end of the day and avoided by the vast majority of urban residents, people without homes rely on marginal spaces to set up temporary and semi-permanent shelter. Other people living on the streets also seek out these areas and in so doing ground webs of reciprocity that enable both physical survival and social networking. These spaces are often not proximal to prime or everyday spaces. Ronnie a former US Navy Seal, rides his bike from an expertly camouflaged camp along Bear Creek to work in downtown Denver. Commuting, he is just another Denverite riding a bike. Working, he is just another day laborer wearing a hard hat. In other words, he remains invisible as a homeless person in marginal, everyday, and prime space.

Purifying Prime Space & Emptying Marginal Space

The wording of Denver’s unauthorized camping ban is tactically distant from criminalizing homelessness, rooting in evenhanded jurisprudence, targeting not social status but human behavior. The ban states that it is “equally applicable to any person who engages in the behavior of camping, regardless of motivation for doing so.” A move on violation, a person ceases to be in violation in the ban as soon a (s)he ceases camping by moving away. The ordinance defines camping as:

Residing or dwelling “in any place with shelter, and conduct activities of daily living such as eating, sleeping or the storage of personal possessions in such place. The term “shelter” includes without limitation, any tent, tarpaulin, lean-to, sleeping bag, bed roll, blankets, or any form of cover or protection from the elements other than clothing.
Dispassionate language thinly veils pointed intent. Moreover, equating the status of homelessness with recreational choice, the ban’s wording serves as an example of “semantic smoothing” (Blomley, 2007) whereby homeless survival is rhetorically morphed into a simple matter of recreational preference.

Denver’s camping ban was crafted in late 2011 in a city struggling to make sense of the Occupy Denver Movement. It became part of Denver’s municipal codebook April 2012. The ban dramatically impacts the lives of Denver’s undomiciled; yet it was Occupy’s appropriation of prime space that gave city council pretext and momentum to pass it. Between late autumn 2011 and early spring 2012, Occupy Denver activists appropriated and exceedingly prime space, Civic Center Park—sited between the State building and the City and County building at the southeast end of downtown Denver’s 16th Street Pedestrian Mall. Because of Denver’s camp curfew protesters could not occupy the park; instead they appropriated its perimeter sidewalks with placards, tents, and protests. Since sleeping on sidewalks and along other public rights-of-way, the city had no legal means of stopping the protest.

The authors of the camping ban pointedly identified Civic Center as a place to celebrate the diversity of community and as a place wherein visible homelessness is out of place. In winning public support for the ban, the Denver Downtown Partnership and the Civic Center Conservancy strategically conflated the housing status with Occupy Denver’s form of protest. In other words, they combined all people sleeping in public in Denver, whether as part of a protest movement or as a matter of everyday urban survival, into the same folk devil (Cohen, 2002). Conflating all people who sleep outdoors into the same target proved an effective strategy. The ban’s supporters repeated visibility tropes in their arguments. For example, during a public hearing on the ban Greg Lenard, general manager of the downtown Hyatt hotel, asked, “Where are the truly homeless?” Throughout the process, Tammy Door, president of the Downtown Denver Partnership,
repeatedly associated Occupy Denver’s appropriation of Civic Center Park with unhoused people finding shelter and relative safety along the 16th Street Pedestrian Mall. During a land use committee meeting debating the legality of the ban, Lindy Dent from the Civic Center Conservancy exclaimed, “there’s no distinction between protesters, homeless or boy scouts. They’re all camping.”

Wound in the same cloth, the Occupy Movements form of protest and a matter of survival for some—urban camping—came to represent a singular and concrete threat to prime spaces. In November 2011, as Occupy Denver wore on, public opinion began to shift from accepting camping as protest to an annoyance with the visibility of camping in public. After several months of negative press, including a scabies outbreak, the ban easily passed city council. The ban was designed to remove visible this visible threat from spaces of symbolic, political, and economic significance. However, because of its generalized language, it is now illegal to camp without a permit in all spaces, public and private, in the city. It is just as illegal sleep in a consenting person’s backyard as it is to unroll a sleeping bag under a freeway overpass. Using the terminology of our model, it is now illegal to camp in all prime, everyday, and marginal spaces within the city of Denver.

In the 19th century, Georg Simmel (2006) wrote of the blasé attitude of city residents—the acceptance of personal anonymity within cauldrons of unfamiliar diversity. Multicultural centers, cities have also long been places free from the strict moral orders of rural areas (Jacobs, 1969; Mumford, 1989). Cities also proffer freedom to associate and disassociate with others on one’s own terms. In rural areas identity is often fixed, a matter of kinship and family. In cities, identity is flexible; people can choose how and when to present themselves to an anonymous public. If a person wants to stand out they can; or she may simply blend in to the anonymity of the urban multitudes, thus becoming invisible as an individual.
This choice leads to our notion *invisible homelessness*. Using the adjective invisible we mean unnoticed as *person without a home*, rather than invisible as *a person*. In this sense, anonymity is a form of invisibility. Maintaining an anonymous identity necessitates reliable routines. The climb towards this type of anonymity steepens as hygiene routines erode. A lack of reliable access to shower facilities and laundromats necessarily produces discernable stigma associated with homelessness such as unwashed clothing and hair, dirty hands and faces, and body odor. When a person is able to blend into the human background, a background to which urban residents and even tourists have a right, they articulate a fundamental right to the city—the right to engage with others on public, noncommittal, terms (Jacobs, 1993; Lofland, 1998; Sennett, 2001; Watson, 2006) within realms of anonymity that public spaces proffer. Denver’s camping ban, by disrupting personal hygiene, mobility and sociability routines, renders the maintenance of everyday anonymity increasingly difficult.

Public space can function as a social equalizer. If designed and managed to foster diversity, these spaces set all persons present on an equal plane, with shared goals of simply navigating everyday purposes around others pursuing similar ubiquitous projects in an un-choreographed dance (compare - Jacobs, 1993). This ideal of public space, in circulation since the Enlightenment, has centered open discourse, on tolerance of difference, on disengaged civility, and shared notions of public etiquette (Gill Valentine, 2008). Without the unexpected, the disorderly, even the unwanted, cities loose their capacity to facilitate personal growth and promote social change (Sennett, 1970). Nevertheless, the modern city can be understood as a project of ordering the disorderly. As cities grow, they necessarily become more diverse and disorderly. Part and parcel governance aimed at restoring urban order is growing list of by-laws and codes purify and proscribing action within public space (Stallybrass & White, 1986; Valverde, 2003, 2005).
The camping ban is an example managing public space not as a social space but as a static landscape. The term landscape implies and presupposes a particular observer perspective of the urban world (Mitchell, 2003). Managing the city as an aesthetic landscape discourages diversity by encouraging the maintenance of clean surfaces and the promotion of order at the expense of lived social relations (Mitchell, 2000). Efforts directed toward people who are homeless are often directed at removing them, their possessions and their neighborhoods—skid rows—from public view. This complete purification of space is tightly intertwined with middle-class notions of legitimate citizenship and paternalistically punitive or compassionate notions of social justice (MacLeod, 2002). A particularly cruel form of spatial discipline, purification is normally directed at prime, high profile commercial districts and gentrifying neighborhoods (Zukin, 2010). Increasingly, marginal spaces along riverbanks (Walby & Lippert, 2011), under freeways (Bourgois & Schonberg, 2009) and in industrial areas (Wasserman & Clair, 2009), anywhere homeless people seek refuge are targeted in cleanup campaigns. Though targeted at prime space, the camping ban works to purify all spaces in Denver. It is used to evict homeless camps, and in the process cleanses marginal spaces of visible signs of homelessness. Because it functions to limit anonymous access to everyday spaces, it disables autonomous contact between Others in public.

Contact and Exposure

Otherness finds its clearest expression in physical appearance. Hence, obvious physical and mental disabilities have been used to mark Others and banish them from public view. Schweik’s (2009) exploration of 19th century “ugly laws” highlights this phenomenon in North American cities in the 1800s. In constructing urban idylls, difference matters. Whatever its difference, the Other is often simply removed from sight. Such “regimes of placement” (Gil Valentine, 2010) root in a strong contrast
between “what we do” and “what they do”, especially in terms of outward appearance and social practice.

Othering processes can be self-perpetuating. Legitimated by laws, codes and policies, social prejudices become embedded in social mechanisms such as ethnicity, race, practice, language, and place (Dovido, Glick, & Rudman, 2005). Jim Crow laws legitimated racism; laws forbidding gay and lesbian marriage legitimated gay bashing. What makes the prejudice against the visibly homeless different from other types of prejudice is that homeless people, lacking cultural, linguistic, religious, or historical cohesion, rarely achieve class-consciousness and agitate for collective rights. A motley collection of individuals, they are collectively treated as unsightly human detritus and systematically removed from public view (Kusmer, 2002; Walby & Lippert, 2011). What is more, physical characteristics such as looking unkempt, carrying one’s belongings, and sleeping on park benches have long been considered lifestyle choices not survival strategies. Through US history homelessness has been portrayed as a pathological, unethical, even criminal lifestyle choice. This dynamic frames the history of the homeless stigma, which ranges from “criminal tramps” riding America’s expanding railroads in the decades following the Civil War, to the “work-shy-bums” of the progressive age, to the current dehumanizing discourse of pathology, dereliction and infringement on the ‘public’s’ quality of life (Hopper, 2003; Kusmer, 2002; Wasserman & Clair, 2009).

Homeless people remain mysterious because there is very little meaningful contact between them and the domiciled.

Allport’s (1979) contact theory posits that interaction with unfamiliar groups is a way to initiate social learning, allowing people differently situated in economic, ethnic, or racial categories to move beyond prejudicial stereotypes. Following fifty years of contact theory research in social psychology (Dovido et al., 2005) it is generally accepted that contact with strangers has great potential for positively altering perceptions of out-
groups. Furthermore, justice scholars have long claimed that opening social discourse to more voices, while leveling the field of interaction, works to achieve social justice (Walzer, 1983; Williams, 1985; Young, 1990). However contact theory has a geographical blind spot. Most scholars testing the contact hypothesis used laboratory instead of field settings, exploring optimal conditions rather than everyday encounters (Wessel, 2009). This ‘perfect scenario’ approach elides urban realities, overlooking the possibility that public contexts enhance or constrain contact and thus indirectly contribute to shaping attitudes (Lee et al., 2004). Remedying this blind spot, our work grows from everyday contact between divergently different Others in real urban spaces.

Unexpectedly rendering many homeless identities visible, Denver’s camping ban fortifies perceptual boundaries between domiciled people and homeless individuals. Consequently, a now visibly homeless person becomes a pathetically unsightly, undoubtedly lazy, and immorally derelict Other in the city’s public spaces. Being invisible as a homeless person is key to breaking through these boundaries. Homeless people have a tenacity to cope (Ruddick, 1990, 1996), to not only survive but ingeniously and anonymously become part of the urban flow. In order to be a part of and not outside of this flow, people without homes must carefully manage the impressions they make on others (Cloke, May, & Johnsen, 2008). Because they move through prime, everyday and marginal spaces they alter their impression management strategies to fit changing spatial dynamics. Cloke and colleagues call this identity work the geographies of performativity (Cloke et al., 2008). Some geographies of performativity are invisible to those co-present in public space. Some, like time spent waiting near institutional spaces or panhandling are necessarily neither anonymous nor invisible. We foreground the largely invisible geographies of performativity, the use of everyday space as a means to blend into the urban background. To Hopper (2006), articulating the ability to refuse shelter or services can be read as a desperate last ditch effort form of resistance to the infantilizing
tendencies of the welfare state. We argue that effectively managing exposure to others in public space is a ubiquitous form of self-affirmation that can be seen either as a form of resistance, subversion or simply as a manifestation of everyday urbanism, a small step toward the just city.

Rene highlights how social barriers of stigma and prejudice hinder contact, “Most people don’t realize that if you just sit down and talk to a homeless person, they’d find out that their situations are more similar to yours than you think.” Accustomed to living on Denver’s streets, she insisted that such conversations can take place on a “lonely park bench” or “on a crowded bus” as long as people are willing to ignore social difference. She also recognized that contact is deeply dependent upon the social-leveling qualities of everyday space and upon a shared anonymity. In other words, it is easier to sit down and talk to someone who does not appear obviously homeless. Of limited traction in the real world of public interaction because it relies on minimalistic conceptions of space, contact theory ignores cultural, political, and spatiotemporal contexts. In multidimensional spaces, physical proximity between groups tends to have a minor effect on contact (Wessel, 2009). Moreover, information, either directly or indirectly obtained often suffices to confirm stereotypical attitudes that trump interactional contact. Understanding this dynamic is crucial to marginalized groups. Managing exposure to others in the real world of diversity, difference, and intolerance is of vital importance to already stigmatized groups, especially to homeless people (Perry, 2012). What is more, Lee and colleagues found that favorable views toward a stigmatized out-group quickly mutate in to antagonistic opposition when the out-group becomes threatening in a concrete or proximate way (Lee et al., 2004). Important to consider here is that threats need not be physical or extreme. Recall that the camping ban was crafted to protect Denver’s prime spaces from the vague threat of visible homelessness. Following Wessel
and Lee & colleagues we place a pure notion of contact theory aside, privileging a notion of improvised everyday exposure over a notion of scripted contact.

Managing exposure to others begins with the micro-politics of everyday encounters—holding doors, giving way, and sharing seats, themselves all examples of “doing togetherness” (Gill Valentine, 2008) and “small achievements in the good city” (Amin, 2008, 2012). To maintain invisibility in public spaces homeless people make concerted efforts to do togetherness. Peter says he’ll just ask people for the time, compelling them to look him in the eye instead of through him. Mason finds that sitting in a park reading a book allows him space to be thought of as a “thinking and feeling person.” Max, homeless for many years and well informed on Denver politics uses initiating conversations with strangers as a way to manage his exposure on his terms.

Chloe and Laine, a married couple, manage their exposure with technology.

We have laptops. When we go to Starbucks, one of us will go to the restroom [to attend to personal hygiene] while the other sets up the computer. That way, they’re like “oh well, they’re obviously not homeless drug addicts. We fit in with the customers for a long time, even if we don’t buy anything at all.

Without a permanent residence or a similarly improvised hygiene routine, identity would impossible for anyone to manage. The presentation of self (Goffman, 1959) in public can be managed, secreted or exposed. Without the stability of a permanent camp, homeless identity is often thrust into view. Some of our informants decided to become invisible as individuals, by fading deeper within the nooks and crannies of the urban fabric. Rene shares, “[setting up a place to sleep] I arrange everything behind me so I look like a pile of trash, not a person sleeping.” To remain unseen, many people sleeping on Denver’s streets spend considerably more time each day hiding camps and caching their belongings. Many choose to carry with them essential items like warm clothes and sleeping bags upon which their survival depends. Doing so marks them as likely a homeless person.
A *move-on* violation, the camping ban forces homeless people into lives of perpetual mobility “wandering the streets endlessly” as Peter puts it or in Ernie’s words “roaming around like zombies carrying all our things.” Denver homeless policy and policing is creating conditions wherein people are in danger of moving from public anonymity to visibility as homeless person, toward “the horrible feeling of being totally ignored like you're a ghost”, as Peter puts it. On the other hand visibility can tend toward animalization, toward being opening admonished to “Git! Git! Git outta here, you fucking dog”, as Roxanne described a recent experience. One homeless couple told of being treated like vermin, being literally flooded out of a parking garage staircase with “gallons and *gallons and gallons* of hot bleach water” poured on them by the cleaning crew one cold January morning.

Human interaction is essential to positive attitude formation of the Other (Wessel, 2009). If conceptualized, managed and policed as an accessible place public space has potential to facilitate positive exposure between people widely divergent in terms of their position in the economy, religiosity, and cultural practices. Everyday diversity not only leads to tolerant attitudes but also contributes to ongoing collaborative efforts toward achieving an open and just city. Instead of opening the city, Denver’s camping ban is closes it. Aided and abetted by fears that visible homelessness threatens profit and capital accumulation, Denver’s it erects a barrier and generates a *fantasy of threat* (Sibley, 2001, p. 245). Threat, whether real or illusory, disables exposure management.

**Visible Homelessness in Everyday Space**

Our informants insist that the ban disrupts daily routines of mobility, hygiene, and sociability. Ernie, homeless in the city for many years and knowledgeable of multiple places to camp, must dedicate additional hours a week to moving between these places. Soon after his eviction, in which he lost most of his belongings, John’s backpack with clothing and personal items was stolen from a temporary cache near a day shelter. After a
harrowing experience with a youth gang that cost him all of his belongings and nearly his life, George struggles to survive day to day. Roxanne shares what life was like before the ban:

We used to have a camp right by Father Woody’s [a day shelter]. We were under the Sixth Avenue Bridge. We had five tents. We had a fireplace, we had dishes, and we had food. We had each other. Monday through Friday we’d wake up, take a shower at Father Woody’s, one block away. We had Standby [a day personnel contractor]. So we’d walk there. We could go work for eight hours. Make fifty bucks. Or we could recycle, anything you make doing that was all yours you know. Sometimes, I’d work for the nut company, the Colorado Nut Company. I’d be at work at 7:30 and I’d get paid that day, $55. Alright! Beautiful day, you know! I’d take my money and go to the movies.

The ban profoundly changed Roxanne’s life. Albeit slowly, almost imperceptivity at first, its barbs became apparent. She continues:

After the hassle of Occupy, I tried to find a spot near the Sixth Avenue Bridge where I could at least put up a tent. They left me a note. The cops left me a note saying you’ve got to move. So I moved up the bridge, closer to Father Woody’s. I stay close to coffee and a shower. They left me another note. It said, “you must move.” I’m like, where the fuck do you want me to move? Where do you want me to go? I’m out of your way. I’m out of the sight of people. I don’t leave syringes. What is your complaint? I want to know! Where do you want me to go? It’s not like I was trespassing or that I snuck into someone’s house. I didn’t cross any fence. It’s all bullshit! What they want us to do is get out of the neighborhoods so the people can’t see us. Okay! Under the bridge, people can’t see me. Kids can’t see me from their backyard. I’m not your eyesore. Where do they want us to go? I don’t get it. And it sucks that I can’t have a tent, because it was some type of accommodation.

Comparing Roxanne’s two extended quotes we notice semantic switch from plural personal pronouns before the ban to singular personal pronouns after the ban. This indicates a manifest shift from familiarity, sociability, and stability provided by social networks toward precarious individual existence. She also alerts us to another salient notion of this essay, she is more often eyesore now that her homeless status is more often visible. Roxanne currently sleeps alone in another marginal space, a residential alley. Sympathetic neighbors do not call the police; however, they disallow her from using a tent.

Proponents of the camping ban convinced city council it would effectively move homelessness from dangerous marginal spaces into the safety of shelters. Roxanne’s story makes clear the legislation did not always meet this goal. Unsurprisingly, many people like her are averse to losing their independence. Homeless shelters are notoriously
regimented and often demeaning forms of confinement (Hopper, 1990, 2003; Kusmer, 2002; Liebow, 1993; Wasserman & Clair, 2009). As several of our participants noted, shelters can be filthy, crowded places wherein theft is a major problem and personal privacy impossible to achieve. Furthermore, even after waiting long hours in line, visible as a homeless person and accepting the ‘opportunity costs’ involved, not everyone is lucky enough to get a bed. For many of our informants, shelters are seen a last resort in case of severe weather. Ironically the ban may have had an effect diametrically opposed to its intent of housing the homeless. According to Robinson’s study conducted after the ban went into effect, 40 percent of Denver’s homeless people now seek a shelter bed more frequently than in the past, 66 percent however now seek more hidden and often more dangerous places to sleep (Robinson, 2013).

The structural violence of law works toward the legitimation of the symbolic violence of social difference. Denver’s camping ban did much to reinforce the already significant social boundaries between the housed and the homeless. Conterminously these boundaries work to lend credence to the ban. This vicious circle is based on empirical errors. Roxanne, explains how perceptions of the Other are often misperceptions:

Before I became homeless, I thought the homeless were lazy. I did! I didn’t know they walked two miles for dinner. They walked forever to camp, they walked forever to get warm clothes, they walked forever to get to where they stashed their sleeping bag.

Commenting on the advantage having found a reliable camp affords her, she insists,

It does matter. It makes a huge difference, it does. You don’t have to roll everything up, carry it around all day, looking destitute and shit.

Roxanne’s insight underlines how perceptions of homelessness are formed and reformed, and she highlights a central theme of our findings; that the difference being invisible as a homeless person and visibly homeless, looking “destitute and shit”, impacts prejudgment and subsequently public interaction.
Not only do homeless stigmas impact how people perceive and interact with the visibly homeless people, in Denver, it has a huge influence on how their behaviors are formally and informally disciplined. Since camping has been defined as using any form of protection from the elements, shouldering a sleeping bag, bedroll, or tarpaulin marks people as homeless. In a word, a person who could store her belongings in a hidden camp in the marginal spaces of the city, becomes instantly visible as homeless as soon as she lugs her belongings through the everyday and prime spaces of the city. Many of our informants told us of being harassed, admonished, and advised of Denver’s no camping ordinance by the police, security guards, parks and recreation employees, and public works employees during the day while simply walking down the street with a backpack or sitting on a park bench with a bedroll under their arm. One afternoon, observing Lincoln Park, a neighborhood park south of downtown Denver, we noticed a police cruiser driving across the lawn toward a group of people in with backpacks and overheard the officer advising them that it is illegal to camp in Denver. These people were sitting at a picnic table in an ostensibly public park; they were not camping. Our informants insured us that, after the ban was passed, because their homeless status is more often thrust into public view, this disquieting practice became common.

Contact with the Other can result in conflict. Counterbalancing the hopeful perspectives of contact are theories of social conflict (Forbes, 2004), which suggests that personal contact with diverse Others increases social discomfort, prejudice, and discrimination. Robert Putnam (2007) argues that “diversity seems to trigger not an in-group/out-group division, but anomie and social isolation.” Discomfiting contact with Others, especially the disadvantaged is what Sennett (Sennett, 2003) might term the “anxiety of privilege”—a phenomenon that our homeless participants described in painful detail. A young woman told us of being harassed by the police. She was not homeless but when the police witnessed her socializing with a visibly homeless man, they
loudly accused her of being nothing but a “two-bit whore.” In another case, one of our informants, after sleeping rough and before she could find a shower, walked into a diner one morning for breakfast and was immediately admonished to “Get out! You’re on drugs or something!” This is a dynamic we noticed often. When we interacted in everyday and prime spaces with informants who were able to manage their exposure, other people paid us no heed. However, when we spoke to people with unwashed and disheveled appearances, we were ‘openly noticed’ by others.

Clearly what type of interaction results from exposure is deeply predicated upon the type of exposure. Exposed to abnormality, dereliction and pathos, people tend to form opinions of the Other ranging from sympathy to outright disgust or a thinly veiled, spiteful pity (Foucault, 2003). This reduces, dilutes, and compresses our view of Others. Encountering obvious abnormality leads to estrangement, spatial segregation follows. Clearly the type and tenor of contact matters. Individual qualities and circumstances vividly brought into sight by accumulated experience of daily intercourse, seldom appear when the intercourse is emaciated or prohibited altogether (Bauman, 2000).

A significant key to public anonymity is not appearing unsightly, lazy, or derelict. We learned from people who are homeless that they craft their everyday identities in ways as simple as taking a daily show getting a haircut every couple of weeks. Doing so, they manage to remain invisible, that is unidentifiable as a homeless person when in public. They avoid places where homeless people congregate, like lines wrapping around homeless shelters. They present themselves as informed citizens by articulating their knowledge of national news and local sports in places, such as parks and coffee shops, in which they will be overheard (for a detailed description of this type of identity work see Perry, 2012). By presenting themselves as ordinary people, often by simply using a mobile phone, they are able to blend in the anonymity of everyday space. Most currently without stable campsites, our informants find it increasingly difficult to present
themselves as ordinary people. Daily routines upended, they are more frequently faced with naked prejudice. Considering not just the motivations but also the consequences of enforcing this ban, this essay deconstructed some of the interpenetrating sociospatial inequities impact the micro-politics of everyday life of homeless people (compare Gill Valentine, 2008).

Arguing that positive exposure to out-groups reducing prejudice toward out-groups, Lee and colleagues (Lee et al., 2004) insist that there are different types of exposure. First of all, exposure need neither be firsthand nor familiar. Information from third party, such as media coverage, lectures, and informal conversations, influences impressions of an out-group. Conflating the Occupy Denver Movement’s appropriation of prime space with homeless encampments in marginal space, the Downtown Denver Partnership was successful in fomenting prejudicial views towards homelessness in general. Lee and colleagues go on to insist that direct observation of the out-group in the course of everyday life provides sufficient familiarity with the out-group to for a person to form either positive or negative opinions about this out-group. This essay has been a primer on how visible homeless stigmata mediate direct observation. Rene shares that after “[people] see you with bags and you look kinda dirty” they tend to give her a wide berth. The effects tend to be self-perpetuating since obvious segregation in everyday space can itself become a homeless stigma.

Only Lee and colleagues’ category of interaction approximates the conventional face-to-face meaning of contact, as Alport develops it. Rene has had people openly insult her with statements like “I’m calling the police because you’re harassing me with your smell.” Necessarily leading both everyday and private lives in public view, our informants preferred to keep the private fact of where they slept last night from entering public discourse. The enforcement of the camping ban, by dislodging essentially invisible and
permanent camps from Denver’s marginal spaces and consequently disrupting personal hygiene routines renders concealing housing status more challenging than before it entered municipal code. Sometimes interaction becomes physical. While panhandling along Speer Boulevard, Carl was “totally doused in motor oil,” by someone screaming “get a job!” George, evicted from a hidden and safe camping spot in a marginal space behind a recycling center, reminds us that interaction can be nakedly violent. He shares a traumatic experience of his new life of forced mobility.

Ever since [my eviction] I’ve been wandering, pretty much every night, looking for a different spot. About a month ago, I was staying out in the Platte River in my tent, and three gangbangers started throwing rocks. I mean big rocks, just huge rocks. They destroyed my tent; almost hit me in the head. It was bad. I didn't know what is going to happen. I was alone and there were three of them throwing rocks. I didn't know if they had a gun. I didn't know if they had knives. I didn't know if they were going to kill me. So I ran. When I came back, all my stuff was gone. Ultimately I ended up losing everything.

Such acts of violence are costly in financial terms, since clothing and shelter must be replaced. They are also costly in emotional terms, rendering it especially difficult muster the grit to present oneself as an anonymous member of the public. Finally, being a victim of physical assault is incredibly stressful and likely does lasing psychological damage.

Ostensibly crafting a compassionate ordinance designed to save people the indignities of sleeping in public, Denver, with its expanding raft of anti-homeless codes, is in fact dehumanizing its homeless. John, is all too aware of the complex process of visible homelessness, “they don’t care about the homeless out here anyway, especially when they find out we have drinking problems, or mental problems, drug problems, health problems. They don’t give a fuck.” Complaining about how difficult his life had become since he was evicted from a longtime camp in Frog Hollow, under Interstate 25 and his personal belongings destroyed, looked us in the eye and asked, “What are you going to do with me, throw me away?”

Anti-homeless ordinances, and the camping ban in particular, have affected movement patterns of Denver’s homeless residents. The shift from relative stable lives
invisibly moving from marginal spaces, from well-hidden camps under freeways, along riverbanks and in industrial districts, to everyday and prime spaces has had a profound impact on daily routines. Now forced to spend the majority of each day finding a new safe place to sleep, it becomes much more difficult to maintain an anonymous identity. It also affects the stability of their social networks. Decoupling from larger groups out of necessity to avoid detection as a “homeless camp” people lose the chance to cultivate and articulate social capital in the protection of person and property. Many informants shared stories of dealing with an increase in theft among Denver’s homeless. Unable to safely cache bedrolls and blankets and openly admonished for lugging these items around, many apparently steal what they need from others. The loss of home at the hand of another, domicile (Akesson, 2014; Porteous & Smith, 2001) also impacts humanity affirming routines. Without the pleasures of home, such as “telling stories around a camp stove” or “watching a Dr. Who episode on our iPad after a long day hustling a living” Denver’s homeless people shared that they feel more homeless, lacking not only permanent shelter but a safe place to anchor everyday life.

Neither contact nor exposure works toward reducing prejudice when the social distance is vast. The camping ban creates social distance; like other anti-homeless laws, it has the effect of legitimating social prejudice against homeless people (Gil Valentine, 2010). The camping ban represents a move away from characterizing people who are homeless as people, delinquent or damaged perhaps. Though homelessness is in large part produced by disadvantageous structural and familial circumstances, labor market conditions, and real estate market dynamics, anti-homeless legislation in effect blames the homeless for homelessness. This has perverse and far-reaching effects. Rather than mobilizing society to attend to the causes of homelessness, such legislation blames its victims. The violence of Denver’s camping ban must therefore be interpreted in terms of a tenacious form of bio power (Foucault, 1991, 1995), one that willfully categorizes and
regulates already precariously positioned people who happen to pose a threat to middle-class notions of domesticity and civility.

This paper has been a street level view of the right to the city. We deconstructed complexities undergirding the formal and informal regulation of public space, pointing out areas of connection between them. As Nicholas Blomley (2005, p. 293) claims, “Law does not just happen to the everyday; it is produced and reproduced in everyday encounters.” George recognizes that unfettered social contact matters, saying, “The more people we, the homeless, are personable with, I believe, the more people will be personable with us. That’s a big thing to me. It really is.” Ernie, on particularly good terms with the police, who know about his camp and rely on him for neighborhood surveillance, notes, “A lot of cops understand that if you’re homeless, you don’t really have any place to go.” Thus far, Ernie has been able maintain his camps and the routines they sustains. He ironically maintains one camp by negotiating with those enforcing the camping ban. This negotiated space allows him to maintain an anonymous everyday identity. Elise insists on the power of effortless yet profound connections saying:

There are so many ways to connect with somebody. I mean people don’t even realize that that old man sitting on the street that no one wants to give any money to, because he’s beat to shit, because he’s a drug addict. If you hand him a bottle of water, that’s a connection. If he’s upset and you listen to him, that’s a connection. I mean every interaction is a connection.

Not only is public space embedded with crucial social services for people without homes (Wolch & Rowe, 1992), they are diverse social spaces of contact between a city’s housed and unhoused residents. Urbanism breeds tolerance; tolerance develops in the context of public space. Arguing on the importance of everyday anonymity, this essay is a call to look beyond diversity and toward commonality in everyday public space. The inclination of critical scholars, social workers, and the criminal justice system to theorize and measure difference and, conversely, neglect similarity leads us to overlook how the interests of widely divergent groups are often fundamentally aligned rather than opposed
(Wasserman & Clair, 2010). Richard Sennett (Sennett, 1976, 1990) calls this spatial orientation a multiplicity of contact points. As we have shown, Denver’s camping ban destroyed manifold contact points between the housed and the unhoused. Denied the opportunity to blend into everyday space, people living on the streets become visibly homeless. Stripped of the means to craft anonymous identities that alone can prevent this form of end-state stereotyping and outweigh or at least mitigate the reductionist impact of the law, homeless people are left with two options. Dedicating more resources of time, energy, and money into not appearing homeless, or disappearing into darker more dangerous recesses of the urban fabric.

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